Panique, ou de la Practique

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Panique, ou de la Practique

by stereokem

Summary

When Will wakes up in his little house in Wolf Trap, it isn't Abigail's blood he finds under his nails.

(In which Hannibal lives up to his word.)

He should call Hannibal. He should. He ought to explain himself, or at least apologize. But that would feel tawdry. And insincere. Because a part of Will was sorry, was deeply ashamed of what he'd done, of what he'd made Hannibal do. But another part of him relished in that memory, cherished it with such perverse delight it didn't seem natural.

He couldn't apologize to Hannibal with that on his mind. Hannibal would see right through it instantly.

Notes

yup. Will has a flip phone.

Self-edited and unbeta'd. Two more chapters of this piece, one of which is already written (just needs editing).

Also, I would appreciate comments/critique on the characterization & writing.

Memphis

From: Abigail H
6:13 p.m.
I have a bad feeling.

Will squinted at the screen of his cheap cell phone, thumbing away at the condensation he imagined was collecting there. It was mid-October, but Memphis was still a veritable sauna. Even now that the hottest part of the day had passed, the atmosphere was still hot and steamy. He had only been outside here for half an hour, and already he could feel a creek of sweat beginning to bead up on his back. Thank his lucky stars he remembered to bring deodorant on this trip.

Though, truth be told, his present perspiring was probably the least potent factor contributing to the general smell that hung around him. In any case, atmospheric humidity could only take so much of the blame for such a cold sweat.

Someone shouted a few feet from him, shouting away from him. His senses felt as though they were only half-way working, everything outside his immediate plane of view having gone blurry and muted. The cell phone screen was the one thing that presented itself with sharp lines, and it blinked brightly up at him, Abigail's cryptic message begging a response.

Willing his thumbs to work, he texted back:

about what?

Abigail had been sending him texts often lately. He had given her his cell number "in case she needed anything"; she had opted not to use it for purely banausic reasons, and he had been tolerant and even responsive. They rarely talked on the phone; there was something frightfully intimate about that, even more intimate than being in a room alone together; but, every so often (and increasingly often now) he would get a text in the morning, or afternoon, and sometimes late at night. Sometimes she would just send him a thought; other times, it was a simple "I can't sleep" to which he would respond in all the ways he hoped were acceptable and appropriate, given their situation.

Since he'd been in Memphis (now for about two weeks), Abigail had sent him several texts, all similar in nature. Vague, slightly foreboding. He had told her he was going to Memphis, and there was only ever one reason for Will traveling: to help catch a killer. Perhaps this was the reason for her concern; but the fact that she had sent him *that* text right *now*—it was more than slightly uncanny.

A few minutes ticked by, and then his phone vibrated again.

I don't know. Just a feeling. Are you OK?

He frowned, his fingers fumbling as he replied:

yeah, i'm OK. should b back by end of the wk.

Abigail responded almost immediately.

Will you come visit me? That is, if you have time.

"Will!"

At the sound of his name, Will looked up, startled, and his senses slid back into focus.

Jack was standing amidst a group of crime scene technicians clad in blue, and was looking over their heads to see what his profiler was doing.

Chagrined, Will typed back a hasty *yes*, folded his phone, and slid it back into the pocket of his worn jeans. He pulled once at the front of his shirt to unstick it from the rivulet of moisture that was beginning to collect between his pectorals, but it was pointless. Aside from sweat, little flecks and larger splotches of dark liquid dotted the front of his shirt. A lost cause if there ever was one. Bracing himself, he ambled over to where Jack and the rest of the crew were standing.

Jack's eyes traced him with shrewd silence, and it reminded Will of the way David Graham would look when he was trying to decide if his son was really ill or just trying to avoid the daily punishment of school. It was insulting, but only slightly: because Will was not a child, he was a thirty-eight year old man covered in sweat and blood, with a very real stab wound to the upper calf and a grazing slash along his jaw. More scars to add to his collection.

Will stood before Jack stiffly. His left leg was killing him, but he didn't want to tell Jack that, not while the other man was judging him.

Jack's expression changed slightly, shifting to show one of its softer, rarer emotions: concern, and non-accusatory doubt. But even these were mired in a frown that was unconvinced.

Jack sighed. Will zeroed in on the beads of sweat that were collecting along his greying hairline.

"All right," said Jack eventually. "Walk me through it."

Dr. Glen Hassard was an associate professor in the small college's political science department. He was also one among fourteen professors that had been questioned regarding the disappearance and gruesome reappearance of their undergraduate students. He was not a genial sort of man, but he was polite, and liked well-enough by his colleges; he was also

stronger than his thin, reedy appearance would suggest, as Will had learned when he found himself suddenly grappling with the man in his second story office.

“Who initiated the confrontation?” Jack wanted to know.

It had been Dr. Hassard, though he had done this only after bringing Will up to his office to sit him down and make sure he was okay. However, it was Will who had chosen to get nosey and poke around the professor’s bookshelves. *Like the proverbial cat*, Hannibal’s voice whispered in his ear.

“Okay. But why were you in his office?”

“He said he had something to show me that might pertain to the case.” Even to Will, the lie sounded bawdy and bow-legged—but that was fine. As long as it could walk, he didn’t need to dress it up. He didn’t need Jack to believe him, per se, just to not ask him any questions. He didn’t feel like explaining to Jack that he had been pouring over crime scene photos in his hotel room around mid-day, only to blink and find himself standing in the middle of the oak colonnade next to the Rhodes College humanities building at sunset. Nor did he need to explain to Jack that running into Dr. Hassard, who had just been exiting the building for the day, was an accident.

Jack looked at him skeptically, but he didn’t linger on that particular detail. “So, you came here by yourself?

Will’s phone buzzed in his pocket, like a secret bee. He frowned. He was running out of places to hide; time to try a different tactic.

“I didn’t know I would be walking into the office of a killer,” he bit out, slightly defensive.

“No,” Jack agreed, “but something changed when you got here. What was it?”

Jack was harsh; some would say relentless. To his superiors, it was mostly thought of as a noble quality; to his subordinates, not so much. Will himself wasn’t feeling too kindly towards those qualities now; he wanted to leave, to go back to his hotel, shower, wrap himself in the white and cream bed sheets and sleep for days. Maybe never wake up.

Will licked his lips. “I saw. . . ” but this part was tricky. How could he explain this to Jack? The other man was accustomed to Will’s leaps of logic and intuition, but this . . . this was more difficult to explain.

Will himself had participated in a group interview of Dr. Glen Hassard when the Quantico BAU team first arrived in Memphis. As much as any real agent, Will was able to keep himself distanced from people (probably even *better* than a real agent); but, he had noticed with some trepidation that he liked Dr. Hassard immediately. This was odd, because there was nothing especially endearing or intriguing about him. He was older than Will, mid-forties, a widower (though he dutifully continued to wear his wedding band), and had been teaching at the college for almost seven years. He was shrewd but tactful, and was able to give them objective insight on some of the other staff members (insight that was not asked for, but catalogued anyway). He held himself in such a way that suggested gentility, but was

also casual enough to be at ease with almost anyone. He was an exceptional conversationalist, and Will found himself mildly preoccupied with the man.

After the initial interview, Will had conducted several of his own on teachers and staff. He had done this simply by wandering around the campus, mentally mapping out its grounds, and speaking to those whom he came across. He was walking across the library green when he crossed paths with Dr. Hassard, who had been chatting with another professor.

When Dr. Hassard saw Will, there was an immediate flash of recognition in his eyes, followed by a respectful but familiar nod and, "Hello, Mr. Graham."

The other professor chose at that moment to depart, leaving Will with Dr. Hassard. Will was surprised at how easily they fell into step and conversation. Despite Will's pervasive social awkwardness, he found it relatively easy to converse with Dr. Hassard, although he had to be a little vague when answering the man's questions about the investigation; this, however, did not seem to bother the professor.

"I know you can't tell me much," he had said, "understand, I am only curious. I know you and your people look for patterns. I was a political analyst, many moons ago; patterns interest me."

"Patterns can tell you a lot," Will agreed. "I can only repeat to you what we've released to the papers: there are patterns, but not ones that reveal identity or real motive."

"Must make your job difficult," Dr. Hassard murmured. "This is unfortunate. I was speaking with the Dean yesterday, and it seems that the board of governors is threatening to close the school. Honestly, with eight students murdered, I can't understand how it hasn't been closed already. Most of us on staff have our bags half-way packed."

"It is difficult to live in limbo."

At that, Dr. Hassard gave him a strange sideways look. "We are all living in limbo, Mr. Graham."

"Will."

With a jolt, Will slammed back into the present. He flushed, and tried to recover himself.

"I—he—"

"How did you know, Will? How did you know he was the unsub?"

Will looked down at his muddy shoes, contemplating his answer. How had he known? Even if he could take Jack back there, to the moment before he had felt that knife blade press up against his back, he couldn't have explained it. Dr. Hassard had asked him to wait in his office while he disappeared into another room, and Will had gotten up to look out the window. He had been staring at the oak colonnade, contemplating Dr. Hassard, and wondering why he felt so akin to the man. There was something familiar about him. He had this presence about him, emanated this quiet internal power. It was heady and comforting.

It was the sort of thing Will normally attributed to Hannibal.

“I just knew.” And jesus, was that an *awful* line. Will looked up, cleared his throat, and quickly attempted to fortify his pronouncement. “Everything clicked together: the arrangement of the bodies, the profile, the timing and geography of the murders. All of that pointed to someone with ties to the college community. We were originally looking for another student, possibly a graduate, but these murders were too sophisticated. So, staff member. And the murders were all personal: the killer didn’t just know *of* his victims, he knew them. He had spent time talking to them, becoming familiar with them. So, professor. Of the professors we interviewed, Dr. Hassard was the only one that could potentially fit the profile.”

“So you shot him.”

Will fought the urge to shove his hands in his pockets and gave Jack a petulant stare. “He did draw a blade on me, Jack.”

Jack was still looking at him in that slightly disbelieving way, and Will felt a well of anger surge up in him. What more did Jack want?

“You pieced this together based on demographics and geography. What about motive?”

Will shifted slightly; his right leg was becoming numb from holding all his weight, but he didn’t want to put any straight on his left leg; that kind of stab wound would probably see him buckling if he tried. “Power,” Will said simply. “He’s a political science professor; he studies power, its manipulation and distribution. Maybe pure academic observation became boring for him. Look, I’m willing to sit down and talk with you about this until all questions and doubts are answered, but my leg is really fucking killing me,” Will gestured to the limb that was still steadily oozing blood through the bandage.

Jack looked down at Will’s leg, as if noticing it for the first time. After a long pause, he nodded. “Have Katz drive you back to the hotel,” he said, turning to catch Beverly’s eye and motioning her to come over. “You leave tomorrow morning.”

As Jack turned away and began walking back towards the thick of the crime scene, Will sighed and pulled out his phone. One new message.

From: Abigail H.
Hannibal has been worried about you.

Beverly didn’t say much to him on the way back to the hotel, and for this, Will was grateful. Of the people Will worked with on a regular basis, Beverly was the most easy to be around and the least judgmental. She questioned him, but not so far as to be prying, and she seemed to understand that Will was different, even if she didn’t fully understand how. If there was

anyone at the BAU whom he could potentially consider to be a friend, Beverly would be his top choice.

"You sure you're good?" she asked as she helped him to his hotel room. Normally, Will would have been repelled by the idea of anyone touching him, even to help. He hated that kind of vulnerability. But Beverly was persistent, and Will didn't have the strength, physical or mental, to argue with her. So he put his arm across her shoulders as she helped him hobble to his lodgings.

Will sank down onto the bed, nodding. "Yeah. I just . . . need to sleep it off." He looked up and gave her his best brave-face smile, even though he was pretty sure it looked more like a grimace. "Thanks."

She shrugged one shoulder, her face hiding nothing. "Sure. Well, I'm going back to the scene, but you've got my cell, yeah?" She watched Will nod, and then extended her hand. "Actually, gimme here."

It took Will a second to figure out what she wanted, but he eventually produced his phone. Beverly snorted. "A flip phone?" but she navigated it fine anyway, and handed it back to Will after a few seconds of button-pushing.

"There. I'm number 4 on speed dial. Just in case."

The smile that Will gave then was fleeting and miniscule, but genuine. "Thanks."

"You been keeping in touch with Abigail Hobbs?"

It wasn't an accusatory question; Beverly had a knack for asking things in very plain tones. But it made Will's expression darken all the same. "A bit. Why?"

"She's your number 3." After Jack and Hannibal, she didn't add.

Will shrugged and leaned down to start taking off his shoes, using the maneuver to help hide his face from Beverly. "We don't talk really. But sometimes she texts me. I figured . . . with all she's been through, she needs to know that someone doesn't think she's a monster."

"Jack seems to think she's hiding something."

Will pulled off one of his boots, eyes trailing the mud he and Beverly tracked into the hotel. Good thing this wasn't coming out of his wallet. The cleaning bill would be awful. "Jack would think the Dalai Lama is hiding something. Suspicion is in his nature."

"Yeah, well, he generally tends to be right."

Will began unlacing his other boot. "What do *you* think?"

He heard Beverly laugh. "I think I'm better at dead bodies and fiber samples than live people. Speaking of which, duty calls."

Pulling off his other boot, Will looked up. "Okay. Well . . . thanks."

“For sure, for sure.” She gave him a little grin, walked back to his door, and opened it. “Number 4!” she called out behind her.

“Number 4,” he called back as the door clicked shut.

Will attempted to sleep on the plane ride back to Virginia, but he was unable to stop himself from thinking of the last text Abigail had sent him.

Hannibal has been worried about you.

Hannibal. Will hadn’t seen the doctor since . . . since that last encounter in Hannibal’s Baltimore office. He felt guilty for not contacting Hannibal; but talking to Hannibal would have meant coming to face what he had done. Will tried not to think about it, tried to shut it out of his mind; during the day, this was accomplished with the aid of the distractions of work, but at night it invaded his dreams incessantly. He kept replaying the scene in his mind: the feel of Hannibal’s wrists under his hands, the immense and heady sense of power as he pushed Hannibal back against the ladder. He couldn’t remember the last time in his life he was ever so aroused, and that in itself was frightening. Exerting that kind of influence over someone so self-possessed and serene as Dr. Hannibal Lecter – to reduce this marble statue of a man into something animal, something that pulsed under Will’s tongue and groaned with the vibrations of Will’s humming—it was more power than anyone had a right to. It was intoxicating.

And it was frightening. Because not only had Will wanted to possess Hannibal—there was a part of him that wanted to do the man physical harm. There had been this overwhelming swell of violence that overtook him, made him both giddy and calm, caused his fingers to tingle with anticipation. He had relished the struggling of Hannibal’s throat as the man fought to breath under Will’s harsh grip. The thought that he could end Hannibal’s life, that he could take away something so intrinsic—the exhilaration was incomparable to anything else in his life.

It was additionally frightening because . . . Will had felt completely in control. He wasn’t hazy, or delusional as he had been when Hannibal had wrapped him in his arms that first time in the office. He felt frenzied for certain, but there was also an utter stillness that had settled inside his chest.

There was only one other situation where Will could remember feeling so calm.

He felt like that when he was recreating the thinking of a killer.

By the time he got off the plane, Will was more than exhausted. All he could think of was getting home to his dogs and his little house, curling up and sleeping until the new week

rolled around. He had his classes covered through this Friday; that gave him five days to become comatose.

He had just grabbed his luggage and hailed down a cab when a high, distressingly familiar voice called out to him:

“Mr. Graham!”

Will turned from placing his bag in the boot of the cab to find none other than Freddie Lounds walking towards him.

Involuntarily, Will felt something hot bubble in his stomach, and his fingers clenched. “Ms. Lounds,” he said, more smoothly than he thought possible.

Freddie Lounds bounded up to him, red curls bouncing joyfully, mouth twisted into that perpetual, knowing smirk. It was petty, but she reminded Will of some of the girls he’d known in high school: able to smile at everyone, but only so much as it hid their cruelty and their vicious gossiping.

(Somehow, though, he doesn’t think the girls from his high school would have approved of Freddie’s penchant for leopard print.)

“Fancy seeing you here,” she said innocently, and Will bit back a snarl.

“Are you stalking me, Ms. Lounds?” he asked carefully, not bothering to hide his contempt.

“Why, Mr. Graham, is that an accusation?”

“It might be.”

“Suffice to say that I don’t stalk people, I stalk stories.” She smiled, showing her white, slightly crooked teeth. “How was your trip to Memphis?”

“It’s really not up for discussion,” Will said brusquely, shutting the trunk of the taxi. The driver, bless him, was still sitting patiently in his seat, and hadn’t motioned for Will to hurry it up. Will turned away from Freddie, moving around the side of the cab to open the side door.

“Are you planning on visiting Abigail Hobbs, now that you’re back?”

That question made Will freeze, his hand stilling on the handle of the cab. He turned to look at Freddie.

She stood there on the tarmac, smiling sweetly at him, eyes twinkling unkindly.

“I will only tell you this one more time,” he said slowly, his voice low and dangerous. “Leave Abigail Hobbs *alone*.”

“I’ll leave her alone when she comes clean. She’s hiding something, Mr. Graham, and I think you know what it is. Has Abigail discussed her father’s crimes with you?”

"*Ms. Lounds*," Will ground out, taking a step towards her; he was momentarily delighted by the tiny glint of fear in Freddie's eyes as she almost mirrored his step backwards. "If you insist on hounding Abigail Hobbs, I'm going to file a restraining order on her behalf."

The fear was gone in an instant, or shoved away somewhere Will couldn't see. "I'm pretty sure only Abigail can do that—unless you have become her *official* guardian. So nice of you and Dr. Lecter to play house with Abigail—"

"Slander is a sin, Lounds, and extremely rude. Someday, someone won't forgive you for it."

Before she could say another word, Will turned around for the last time, jerked open the door, and got into the cab. "Quantico," he directed as he slammed the door closed.

There was one message on Will's home phone when he got there.

Beep. "Hi, Will. This is Alana. Jack said you were coming back today, but let me know if you need me to come by and feed your dogs tomorrow. I . . . hope you're doing all right. Call me when you get a chance." Click.

Will's cell buzzed in his pocket. He took it out slowly, but his dread vanished when he saw who it was.

Make it back in one piece? – B

Walking around his living room to plop down in the easy chair, Will texted back. *yeah, thks. gonna sleep it off.*

Beverly was a quick responder.

Kk. I'll let Jack know.

Will nodded to himself and closed his phone. He wondered how long it would be before he had to talk to Jack face-to-face again.

Not long enough.

Will closed his eyes and rubbed his hands in them. He was exhausted. Not just sleepy, but bone-tired. Everything, including his head, hurt.

One of the dogs—a grey mutt named Ponder—nuzzled at the hand that was dangling off of the side of the chair, and Will patted him absently. Most people who knew Will assumed he was antisocial, didn't like company. This wasn't entirely true; he required the comfort of company just as much as anyone else. Dogs were just safer. They were more loyal, less demanding, and less judgmental than people.

Before Abigail and Hannibal, it felt like Will's dogs were one of the only good things in his life.

Fitfully, Will used the hand not petting Ponder to open his phone again. He stared at number 2 on his speed dial. The name *Dr. Hannibal Lecter* glowed up at him, both inviting and foreboding.

He should call Hannibal. He should. He ought to explain himself, or at least apologize. But that would feel tawdry. And insincere. Because a part of Will *was* sorry, was deeply ashamed of what he'd done, of what he'd made Hannibal do. But another part of him relished in that memory, cherished it with such perverse delight it didn't seem natural.

He couldn't apologize to Hannibal with that on his mind. Hannibal would see right through it instantly.

God. What must Hannibal think of Will now? Hannibal was the one person in all of this who had never thought of him as strange or disturbed— but now? What if Hannibal wanted nothing more to do with him? That thought sent a tremor through Will.

But Abigail's text floated back to him, and it told a different story.

Hannibal has been worried about you.

Hannibal had been to see Abigail. Hannibal was worried. Perhaps Hannibal didn't hate him.

Sighing, he sat up. He would shower, brush his teeth, call Alana back, do some reading, and go to bed. And then, tomorrow, he would go see Abigail; maybe, after that, he would even find the courage to go see Hannibal—assuming Hannibal would permit that.

Something told Will that he would.

Panic

Chapter Summary

I would appreciate comments/critique on the characterization & writing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He cleaned up to go visit Abigail. He shaved (or at least trimmed himself up), combed his hair, picked out a flannel shirt with a minimal amount of dog hair, scraped the mud from his shoes; he bandaged up his leg tightly over the dressing the EMTs had applied, and even trimmed his nails, removing the dirt and leftover particles of blood from underneath them. He almost *felt* clean.

Abigail smiled immediately when she caught sight of him—but her smile vanished as soon as he took two steps into the room.

"You're hurt," she said, and the observation was filled with thinly veiled panic and worry. Her blue eyes were wide on him, like two openings into a clear summer sky.

He gave her a half smile, aware that it might look like a snarl and hoping she'd forgive him for it; these days, he lacked the muscular coordination to fake a good grin. "Not badly," he said in as reassuring a voice as he could muster. "EMTs patched me up pretty good."

A strange look passed over her face.

"Oh . . . can I see?"

Maybe it was because he was distracted, or perhaps it was the exhaustion that he hadn't managed to sleep off the night before, but somehow Will was not as fazed as he should have been by that request. He even failed to notice Abigail's tiny flush as she herself realized what an inappropriate question this was. Instead, Will hobbled over to the chair across from where Abigail had been curled up, reading, and lowered himself gingerly into the seat. "Probably shouldn't take the bandages off," he said, shaking his head.

She nodded once, and her long swan-throat peeked up over her scarf. "Oh. Right."

He nodded at the book in her white hands. "What have you got there?"

That garnered the return of her smile, albeit smaller than before. She slid her bookmark in place and closed the book so that she could hand it over to him. Obligingly, he reached for it

and pulled out his glasses to examine it.

“Jane Goodall,” he said, reading the title and opening it to skim the flyleaf.

“Yeah. . . . I’ve been thinking about what I want to study—when I go to college. I think . . . I think I want to study animals.” Another small, meek smile.

He did not try to smile when he handed back the book, but he was nonetheless pleased. “Animals are extraordinary,” he said.

She nodded, accepting back the volume and contemplatively running her fingers along the spine. “Yeah. I never thought about it much before, but the solutions nature has come up with for animals to deal with different environments, different selective pressures—it’s pretty mind-blowing. And every ecosystem is so carefully orchestrated in the way it functions, and the way the plants and animals coexist in it. It’s like this cozy little machine.”

“One that humans have thrown a wrench in,” Will observed, kicking himself moments after the morose words left his mouth.

But Abigail didn’t seem deterred; she merely nodded. “Yes. I was reading about ecology and human influences, and they talk about invasive species—you know, animals that can thrive in a wide variety of habitats and conditions. When they’re introduced to somewhere new, they tend to disrupt the entire ecosystem, and sometimes out-compete other species. That’s—that’s what we’re like. We’re like the ultimate invasive species.”

Will made a thinking sound. “Not only are we a problem to ourselves, but also to everything living around us,” he supplied.

“Basically. But our influences don’t have to be just negative. We can do a better job. We can change the way we treat nature, and not just see it as something to be used.”

“Easier said than done. You’d have to change a lot of people’s minds about a lot of things to accomplish that.”

She gave him a look that was a little bit sad and a little bit angry, but mostly empty. “I’m already trying to do that,” she said sullenly.

Will chewed on the inside of his cheek. He didn’t know what to say to that. He never knew if it was okay to bring up the subject of Abigail’s dad. He got the sense that she was both loathe to discuss it, and simultaneously desperate to do so. He could never pluck up the courage to bring it up himself, but it was always there, hanging over their heads. It was the one thing that constantly connected them, he realized, strung along their moments of silence while they waited for the next poorly locuted parody of normalcy.

Before the silence could make too long a stretch, Will cleared his throat. “I saw Freddie Lounds yesterday. She . . . accosted me at the airport. I think she’s getting desperate.”

The implied fact that Freddie Lounds had known when he was going to be arriving in Virginia seemed to faze Abigail about as much as it had Will—that is to say, not at all. She

simply nodded. “Hannibal said that might happen.”

He nearly started at the mentioned of the doctor’s name. “W-why?”

At this, Abigail looked slightly uncomfortable, casting her eyes down. “I told her that I didn’t want to have any more contact with her. I want to tell my own story. Hannibal thinks that, regardless of what I tell her, she’ll twist it up—make me a criminal anyway.”

Hearing those words, Will felt a huge flood of relief. Freddie Lounds made his skin crawl. (She also made his hands itch, but that was a different matter.) She was a bagful of bad news, especially to him and Abigail—even more so, knowing now what he did about Nick Boyle.

This was the third time Will had visited Abigail in the hospital after making that discovery in Hannibal’s office. Truth be told, he avoided coming to see her for some weeks after acquiring this new knowledge. When he finally broke down and came to see her the first time, he had been afraid that she might look different to him, that he might see her differently knowing that she had killed.

But, no: when he finally laid eyes on her, he didn’t see a darkness crawling out from under her skin. All that presented itself to him was the image of a young woman, damaged and fragile but strong and enigmatic in her deer-like way. He didn’t have to worry that his expression in greeting her had changed or that his mannerisms towards her were different. To him, she was still the same, still Abigail.

They had not talked about Nicholas Boyle, not yet; but it was only a matter of time. Slowly, they were developing a gentle familiarity with each other—almost familial. Like the subject of her father, Will would not bring it up himself, but he imagined it would not be long before the incident came up in conversation.

He wondered if she and Hannibal talked about it.

“He’s probably right,” Will replied, leaning back in the chair. It squeaked beneath him, the wicker shifting.

Abigail also shifted, pulling her legs together tighter and clutching the edges of her book like a life-raft. “He’s, um . . . he’s been asking about you.” She paused and fiddled with the corner of her book. “I 7 tell him much because—well, I don’t really see you a lot either. But I think he’s worried. Have you talked to him? Did something happen?”

Hannibal had asked after him. Something about that made his gut twist in ways that were unpleasant, made the skin of his cheeks and on the back of his neck flush. However, somewhere deeper in the back of his brain, there was an electrical spark of excitement. “No, no. I’ve just . . . I’ve been busy. I’ll give him a call. I promise.”

She gave him a smile that said she didn’t quite believe him, but she was willing to try. “He’ll be relieved.”

“Yeah.”

They talked for another hour or so. Abigail expounded further on her reading, and it pleased Will to see her so enthused about something outside of her small life here; it was nice to hear someone talk about something that had nothing to do with murder and blood. There was such animation in her eyes and voice, in the movements of her hands; it was easy to forget, for a moment or two, who they were and why they were here.

But, eventually, the time came for Will to take his leave. It was time for Abigail's required group therapy session, an event that Abigail expressed obvious and unapologetic distaste for. Will was struck by the sudden and absurd urge to check Abigail out of the hospital for the day—but quickly recalled that he would have nowhere to take her unless they went back to his home . . . and he didn't know how she felt about that, and he didn't think he was quite ready for the pressure that might create. So he forgot about it. Hannibal could have handled it, would have had no qualms about any of it; but Will was Will, and, as of late, he was less and less sure of himself and what he could handle. No need to subject Abigail to that as well.

So he smiled at the nurse that came by, and thanked him. Then they both rose from their seats and Abigail turned to face him, book in one hand; she looked at him intently, as if waiting for something.

Just when it was starting to get uncomfortable, when he was about to open his mouth and ask – well, he didn't know— Abigail did something that surprised him.

She stepped forward, closed the distance between them, and hugged him.

He was so shocked that, for a moment, he forgot to hug back; but his arms found their way around her of their own accord, and he exhaled his apprehension.

The hug was short-lived, and after another exhale he felt her tug against him, and he let his arms drop. She stepped away, and gave him what he was coming to think of as her trademark broken smile. Then she turned, and followed the nurse out of the room.

On the long drive back to Wolf Trap, Will found himself wondering about Abigail extensively. What had her life been like before all of this? What had her father been like? Will knew Hobbs the killer, but Hobbs the parent was a different beast entirely—or so he had thought. Now, he wasn't so sure. There was a line of symmetry there, somewhere. Had Garrett Jacob Hobbs killed before Abigail? It seemed unlikely that he wouldn't have—that kind of killing didn't just spring up on someone. There would have been precursors, earlier patterns of violent behavior.

Except that there weren't. The team had done a whole work-up on Hobbs from birth to death. They looked at records, interviewed family members, etc., and there had been absolutely no indication that Hobbs was anything but ordinary. No cruelty to animals or behavioral disorders; he'd been a mediocre student in school, and a dutiful, respectful employee everywhere he worked. He had been average. *Normal*.

Until Abigail.

But not just until Abigail; Garrett Jacob Hobbs was not violent in Abigail's childhood. He had waited until her adolescence to begin his killing spree.

Why?

As Will drove along the long, newly paved roads that ran through the heart of Wolf Trap, he found himself wondering what it might have been like to raise Abigail, to take her from an infant in swaddling clothes to this young woman about to begin her adult life.

A beautiful, but unbearable sight for any father.

Will tapped his hands on the steering wheel in agitation. This was the part of Hobbs that he hadn't been able to see, the part that he couldn't get close to. Why had he killed girls in place of Abigail? There had been no sexual trauma to any of them, so it most likely was not some incestuous infatuation—but he *had* been infatuated. He had loved Abigail more dearly and much more profoundly than his own wife; Marjorie had almost been a third wheel in the Hobbs household. For the past seventeen years, Garrett Jacob Hobbs's life had revolved exclusively around his daughter.

What was it about Abigail that had given her father a reason to kill?

The image of Garret Jacob Hobbs bleeding out on the kitchen floor snaked its way into Will's mind. The way Hobbs had smiled, almost relieved.

See? See?

When Will got back to his house, he let out the dogs. Once they were all herded back inside, he flopped down onto his couch and pulled out his cell phone.

Flipping it open, he maneuvered to his contacts. He stared at the screen as if transfixed, eyes trained on the name that sat at number 2 in his emergency contacts.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

In the end, he didn't make the call. But in his head, the phone rings and rings and rings.

Two days later, at almost five in the evening, he got a text.

From: Abigail Hobbs
4: 48 p.m.
In trouble. Please come.

He didn’t think twice; he just grabbed his coat and fled his Quantico office. As he careened down the hall, he passed Beverly, who gave him a strange look; however, she did not stop him, and he made it to the employee parking garage in record time, flinging open the door to his dingy little car, jumping in the driver's seat, and starting the engine.

All the way to the hospital, his head raced with adrenaline. What was going on? Was she all right? He tried calling her while he was doing 70 down the highway, but her phone rang once and then went to voicemail. Either dead or turned off. Will grit his teeth and flung his cell into the back seat of the car. Perfect.

When he arrived, he immediately noticed Alana’s hybrid in the parking lot. A small bit of relief washed through him. Alana was here. Maybe Abigail had texted Alana too? But what if they were *both* in danger?

The speed at which he hurled himself through the double doors of the main entrance caused some fuss, and the receptionist at the main desk stood from her chair and began to yell at him. He didn’t pause for her, didn't even spare her a glance, just flashed his temporary FBI badge and kept walking. She didn’t call after him.

When he finally made it to Abigail’s door, he was breathing hard, having jumped the stairs two at a time and ran at break-neck speed down the hallway. As he clutched the handle, he steeled himself, prepared himself to bear witness to nearly anything that the room revealed.

Except for the sight that greeted him.

Abigail was sitting on her bed, one leg tucked under her and one hanging off the side of the bed. She looked scared and angry, but otherwise unhurt.

Alana Bloom was standing a few feet away. By her posture, it was obvious she’d been talking to Abigail, even arguing with her maybe; but now her attention was focused entirely on Will, and she gaped at him, slightly slack-jawed.

“What’s going on?” he blurted out. Even though he could see there was no immediate danger, and some of his frenzy had dissipated at the anti-climactic end of his mad-dash to Abigail's rescue, he didn't let himself relax completely. No one was hurt, but it was obvious there was something very wrong here.

Alana gave him a confused look. “What are you doing here?”

He ignored her, something he had never done before. Instead, he looked to Abigail where she sat on the bed. Now that he looked at her again, he could see that she was shaking slightly. “Abigail, what’s the matter?”

Abigail looked at him with her watery blue eyes, kind, thankful for him—and then turned her gaze on Alana, and all the kindness was gone. If eyes were weapons, Alana would have been speared. “They’re taking me away,” she ground out. Her voice was shaking as well, with a volatile mix of fear and anger.

“They who? Where?” he must have sounded like an idiot, but he didn’t care. He needed answers.

Alana stepped toward him. “The FBI is coming to collect Abigail shortly. They will be moving her to a high-security facility where she will await trial.”

“Trial?”

“For accessory to murder.”

Will looked at Abigail again, who wouldn’t meet his gaze. Her fear had come back to take the dominant role over her emotional features, though she was trying to school them hard into stoicism, biting her lip and staring at the pattern of damasked roses on her duvet.

“What?”

It was then that Alana stepped up to Will, barging into his personal periphery and forcing him to acknowledge her. When he met her gaze, it was stern and level. “Can I talk to you outside?”

Will glanced over her shoulder to look at Abigail again; but Abigail’s face was turned towards the window, her profile stony save for her bottom lip, which was trembling.

Grudgingly, Will nodded.

She gestured for him to step out first and he complied, turning around immediately once he was on the other side of the door. Alana had barely let the door thud closed behind her when Will blurted out:–

“What did Jack find?”

Alana, standing with her back to the door, gave him a curious, narrow-eyed look, one that sent a tremor of annoyance through him. Perhaps it was his tone that made her pause, so matter-of-fact, or perhaps it was his assumption that further evidence had been uncovered. Alana had always experienced trouble keeping up with his mind. She couldn’t take him in and catalogue him away to be examined later; she always had to pause in the moment to analyze him. She was to be blamed for this failing, and he normally tolerated it; but he had no time or patience for it now.

“Jack had a team track Hobbs’s movements during the time period of each abduction,” she responded slowly, clever eyes scrutinizing his face for any changes. “They found evidence to place Abigail with her father at each one. And . . .” she paused, “. . . they managed to track down a view witnesses that saw someone fitting Abigail’s description talking to a few of the girls before they disappeared. She was with him at every step of the abduction process. There is no way she wouldn’t have known, Will.”

Alana’s words sank light dead-weights through him, plopped like pennies to the bottom of a deep well. He felt them concretely, their weight and meaning, but also felt detached from

them. It was as if Alana were talking about someone else, another girl, another Abigail—not his Abigail. (And when had he started to think of her as his?)

"Jack thinks she was the bait." His words were hollow, statement, not query.

Alana continued to watch him intently. She folded her arms slowly. "It looks very likely. Even if she didn't actively help her father in the murders, she at least knew what he was doing."

"Let me talk to her." Perhaps there was some explanation. If he could speak with Abigail in private, ask her himself—

But Alana shook her head firmly and crossed her arms. "I can't let you do that. Jack doesn't want you to have contact with her. He thinks you're protecting her."

Will snapped back into focus and narrowed his eyes. "Do *you?"*

She gave him a rueful look, as if he had said something insulting, when in fact that accusation was the kind of thing that came out of his mouth normally—just usually directed at people that weren't her. Up until recently, Alana had held a special place in Will's hierarchy of people; she had rested securely on a marble pedestal, with her cleverness and concern, her bright dresses and guarded smiles. He had beheld her as someone he could respect and admire; perhaps even someone he could adore.

But she had been looking at him differently as of late, much as she was looking at him now. It was as if she only dimly recognized him.

"On this point," she said slowly, "it doesn't matter what I think. It's Jack's rule as law—though I will say that putting yourself that close to Abigail Hobbs doesn't look good for you."

He would have been very, *very* tempted to laugh at her—if it weren't for the fact that he could feel the icy blossom of rage beginning to nucleate in his chest.

"What about – Hannibal?"

It was the first time he'd said the name out loud in weeks, and it presented him with such a reprieve that, for a moment, he nearly forgot why he had uttered it.

Alana shook her head again. "Hannibal isn't Abigail's psychiatrist, and you getting him involved won't help matters any. The best thing that you can do for Abigail is stay away."

No. Will could feel himself constrict, something almost like pain shooting through him. His head was beginning to feel hazy—no, not hazy, sleepy, as if he was languidly lying in a warm bath about to doze off despite the fact that he was peripherally tingling with something that felt dangerously like anger. He closed his eyes and saw Abigail there. They couldn't take her away. They *couldn't* lock her up—

"Do you know what you're doing to her?" he said through clenched teeth. "Do you *know*—"

“Will—”

He recoiled the moment before her fingers reached his arm, and the movement was so sudden and violent that it caused Alana to jump and yelp in alarm—

But the sound didn’t make it far, barely traveled a yard down the hallway before he severed it from its source, stepping forward and crowding her around the door, putting his hands on her throat. It was white as ivory under his rough hands, and he could feel the strain of her as he tightened his grip, squeezing, and her face was hidden by the hair that had fallen over it but he needed to see her face—

“Will!”

It wasn’t quite a shriek, and wasn’t quite a question. But the nature of the sound wasn’t as important as its effect: it hooked him like a physical force around the navel, shoving him backwards, and he blinked several times to clear his vision. . . .

It was then that he saw it. The smoke cleared, and he realized that his hands were not trapped around a struggling throat, but curled into firsts at his sides. He was not touching Alana—but as he looked up from his hands, he saw that she was pressed with her back against the door, looking at him with something even more ugly than the cold anger that was singing in his veins:

Fear.

It was etched into her face via the slick line of salt and water that had streaked down from her eye. Alana Bloom, who had only once been in a room alone with him, who had professed to be his friend, who claimed to have *feelings* for him—was afraid of him.

Oh god.

It was like someone had taken a pair of garden shears to the taught coil of wire inside him, because it felt like something in him snapped, broke open, exposing him. A wave of remorse hit him, catapulted over the walls of his fury and shaking him soundly. *Oh god, shit, what have I—*

“Alana?” he didn’t recognize his own voice, small and weak.

She said nothing, only swallowed thickly, watching him with her wide eyes.

He didn’t quite remember coming out of the hospital. He simply knew that, after a while, Alana’s face washed away to be replaced with the dark, shiny, surfaces of the few cars in the hospital parking lot, reflecting what they could of the deep dusk left by the absent sun. The October cold did nothing to dissuade the hot haziness buzzing around his brain, and he noticed absently that he was shivering in his coat. His vision was swimming just a little bit, and it took great focus to make anything remain still, but he strode out across the tarmac anyway, trying to determine which shiny surface resembled the one that belonged to his car. Where, *where* had he parked—?

“In a hurry, Mr. Graham?”

That voice: how he perfectly *loathed* the sound of that voice.

He whirled around until he found what he was looking for: a perfect nest of red curls, sitting like a wreath above a calculating, cherry-flavored smirk.

Except that her mouth wouldn’t stay still. It seemed to slide around her pale face like a roaming wound, a slash that opened and closed to expose rows of bleached white bone.

He closed his eyes and brought a hand to his face. It was surprisingly warm, hot even.

“Lounds.”

He heard her take a step forward, heel crunching on the gravel. “My, my, you look perturbed. What is new in the world of Abigail Hobbs to have you in such a state?”

He opened his eyes and gave her what he hoped was a withering look. “Piss off, Lounds.”

She simply smiled wider. “Something dreadful, it sounds like.´

God. Even when he closed his eyes he could see her smile. He wanted to rip it from her face, pull it like taffy in his hands. It would be soft and wet and pliant, just as a mouth should be. And if he took it away from her, he would take away her weapon, the only means by which she could harm him. He could end her, remove her very vitality and *end her*—

His head was swimming violently now, making him teeter. He whirled and lurched away from where Lounds was standing. Where the hell was his car? If he could get to his car—

A queer smell suddenly invaded his olfactory senses, something both flowery and sulfuric in nature. He nearly gagged, brought his sleeve up to his mouth and coughed violently.

“. . . so well, Graham. . . .”

Freddie’s voice . . . sounded like it was reaching him from underwater. It was passing through many layers and layers of liquid matter, even as his ears rang with their own tiny choir of bells. Everything around him was moving more slowly, from the snowflakes to the movement of Freddie’s lips as she called out something unintelligible . . . where was . . . his car . . . Alana . . . Abigail.

Freddie.

It was as if the night itself cuffed him around the back of the head.

Will tripped, staggered, tumbled forward into darkness.

The night was there to greet him when he awoke.

He came to slowly, by inches, by degrees. He noticed first the scratchy wool of blankets against his bare chest. Then he became aware of his limbs, stiff and heavy where they were splayed. The smells and physical sensations of a familiar bedroom slowly surrounded him. He knew where he was.

His eyes creaked open like old wooden slats.

The digital clock on his nightstand glowed eerily at him. 12:46 a.m. His skin jumped, but he forced himself to push up slowly from the bed. Hours. It had been *hours*.

He had lost time.

Don't panic, don't panic, not yet—

He straightened into a sitting position and winced; his head pounded as if with hangover. Hastily, he rubbed at his eyes, which they felt as grainy as if someone had poured sand into them.

It was then that he noticed the smell.

He pulled his hands away from his face and stared down at them.

His hands were dirty—dark and sticky. There was stickiness on his eyelids where he had touched them and everywhere, faint and cloying, was the coppery and unmistakable smell of old blood.

But, just underneath that, something else: something strange and sweet and cloying, like flowery liqueur. . . .

As he looked, his hands started trembling. Bile climbed up this throat, and he barely made it to the waste-bin by his bed before he was vomiting violently, almost choking on his own expulsion.

It was mainly water, remnant juices from his stomach gone empty the last two days, empty from worry and sickness. Only water, only coffee . . . but even in the dim of his black bedroom, even squinting through watery eyes, Will knew he'd coughed up something else, something solid and soft. Horror quivering in his heart, he peered down.

Several small pieces of flesh winked up at him from the bottom of the waste-bin.

He was on the verge of hyperventilating when a sudden sound drew his attention towards his bedroom door.

There were vague shadows pacing in the slip of space between the door and the floor; there was a sound, as of the nails of paws being draw against the wood, accompanied by the unmistakable whine of a dog.

Will got up automatically, rising on unsteady feet and tottering towards the door. When he opened it, Winston and Ponder were both standing there, looking up at him concernedly, their tails tucked slightly. Ponder sniffed at his hands and whined again. He was about to murmur something reassuringly to them when a wave of smell hit him.

If he hadn't scented it before in his room, the odor would have made him double over and retch again. It was more powerful here, in the empty air of his dark hallway, but not overpowering; actually, it was fairly mild— but amid the smells of dog and dust, it stuck out sorely, immediately recognizable.

A warm tongue curled around the knuckles of his right hand and Will snatched it away from Ponder, who yipped. He ignored the mutt, turning his attention instead to Winston, who had ambled to the end of the hallway and was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, where the light had been left on. He was looking back at Will anxiously, as if expecting him to follow. His tail untucked, and he wagged slightly.

Dutifully, Will complied. Slowly, like an old man, he made his way down the short, narrow hall, and stopped in the doorway to the kitchen.

He looked for a long time.

Then, he turned heel. He went back to his bedroom, and eyed the cell phone on his nightstand.

He did the only thing that made sense.

He picked up the phone and called Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

1. Before anyone leaves a comment regarding this (because you are an intelligent lot and someone might be picky enough to want to clarify, which I can appreciate), I realize that Abigail's discussion about ecology is very generalist and not the full picture. I have studied ecology and environmental science, and that's a melting pot of issues and factors if there ever was one. I was simply trying to convey in a few sentences this young girl's blooming interest in these fields of study. Also, it was easy to segue from this conversation into one about her father. However, I will maintain that mankind is the ultimate invasive species.

2. Further along that note, I always thought that, if Abigail went on to college, she would probably end up studying ecology or animal physiology or something along those lines. I could also see her becoming a plant physiologist/botanist/agronomist. God forbid she become a psychology or criminal justice major.

3. I do not anticipate being able to post before next weekend. Along with many others, I am in the middle preparing for finals.

Practice

Chapter Summary

I lied. There will be one more chapter following this one, as an epilogue of sorts.

I would appreciate comments/critique on the characterization & writing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal picked up on the third ring.

The doctor did not sound tired, nor did he sound irritated or bewildered to be called at such an hour by his not-patient. He didn't sound like anything at all, actually. His answer was simple, unreflective:

"Will."

He couldn't remember ever feeling so relieved to hear his own name in his life.

The steadiness of his own voice surprised him as he asked Hannibal if he would please come over. Hannibal asked no questions; perhaps he had a preternatural sense for the unspoken, or perhaps there was something in Will's voice that he himself could not hear. In any case, Hannibal simply replied that he would be at Will's residence in approximately one hour.

As Will brought the phone away from his ear and clicked the *end call* button, his phone flashed at him, the display blinking impatiently.

Five missed calls, two voice-mails and one new text message. Shakily, Will began going through them. Two of the calls were from Jack, two were from Quantico office numbers, and one was from Alana. All of the calls were placed about four or five hours ago. Only the text message was recent, having been sent at 11:54 p.m.

From: Beverly Katz

Call me.

Mechanically, Will went to his emergency contacts, pressed number 4, and brought the phone back to his ear.

When Beverly answered, she sounded out of breath. *"Will!"*

“Bev,” he answered, his legs wandering of their own shaky accord to his tattered couch; he sat down stiffly. “Jack—”

“—nearly went ballistic,” she interrupted. *“You weren’t answering your phone! What the hell, Will?!”*

Automatically, he brought a hand up to scrub at his face—but stopped at the scent of iron and dirt. Instead, he stared at his hand in the darkness, eyes tracing the dim outline. “I—I’m sorry, I was asleep—here, at home.”

Beverly laughed on the other side of the line, a breathless, humorless bark. *“Yeah, I figured that one out, only because I was able to place you at a stoplight in Wolf Trap around 7:45. Jack was about ready to send a SWAT team over there.”*

It was almost a good thing that he wasn’t thinking all too clearly, he reflected, because it made him sound more believably like he’d just woken from a deep sleep. Carefully, he lowered his hand back down, not to the couch but to rest on his thigh. It was only then that he realized he was not wearing his clothes from before—or, rather, not all of them. He was still wearing the same boxers he’d put on that morning, and his white undershirt; but his jeans and button-up were missing.

He licked his lips, and tried to focus on the conversation; it was much more difficult when the person on the other end lacked a deep, calming voice. “SWAT team? Wait—why were you looking at stoplight cameras?”

*“Because we couldn’t fucking **find** you, and the last person who saw you was Alana before you stormed out of the hospital—“*
The memory of Alana cowering against the door of Abigail’s room flashed behind his eyes, and he felt something in his stomach lurch. *Oh god. Alana.* “Beverly,” said Will suddenly, “what is going on?”

The momentum of Beverly’s previous tirade made her hesitance to answer this question all the more unnerving.

Will listened intently to Beverly’s soft breathing on the other side of the line. He imagined her, standing in her office at Quantico, having come up short from pacing, gun on her hip, leather jacket around her shoulders, features drawn into a tight expression. He kept this vision of her in his mind’s eye, and waited.

A whoosh of breath came over the line, a wary exhale.

“Abigail Hobbs is missing.”

It was interesting, he noted distantly, how that news came both as no surprise and a punch low in the gut. “Missing?” he echoed.

Beverly resumed her pacing, the faint thud of her boots just barely audible. *“Yeah. After you left, it was just Dr. Bloom waiting for the FBI team to get there—which was fucking stupid, if you ask me, I don’t know why she was there by herself in the first place. Security cameras in*

the hallway and reception area have you two arguing, and then you storming out at around 6:30. Bloom went back into Abigail's room. But about fifteen minutes after you left, Abigail made a break for it. Our team found Bloom concussed when they finally arrived on scene."

Will's mind started racing. *No, no, no. Abby.* "But where is she? Abigail? She couldn't have gotten far—"

"She stole a car, Will—and she might have a hostage."

He brought a hand to his head; his ears were ringing. *"What—?"*

There was shouting in the background on Beverly's end of the line, and a returning bellow from Bev herself. When she returned to the phone, she sounded even more stressed than before. *"Will, I can't stay on the phone. Stay home, I'll talk to Jack, let him know where you are— Jesus, I'm* ***coming****!—don't go anywhere, okay? Call me later if you need anything, but* ***don't*** *go anywhere."*

"Okay," he whispered weakly as the line went dead.

Will was sitting on the porch when Hannibal's Bentley finally pulled up.

He had washed his hands, scouring away most of the blood with hot water. He was still in hisskivvies. It was much too cold to be dressed like that, but after hanging up with Beverly, he'd been too numb to bother putting any more layers on . . . and he hadn't wanted to walk back through the house. It was strange, but it didn't seem safe for him to be inside all alone with . . . well.

Winston, Ponder, and a chocolate-colored mutt he'd named Muriel had all followed him outside. Winston sat by him stolidly, while Ponder wandered around the front yard, nose pressed to the ground; Muriel paced the porch for a bit before settling down near Will's feet. She nuzzled his toes occasionally, which were so cold he could barely feel them.

With the flare of approaching headlights and the crunch of gravel and dirt in the drive, all the dogs immediately stood to attention. They yipped and crowded around Will, determined to protect him.

Will watched from his seat on the porch steps as the car lights were killed and a familiar dark silhouette stepped out of the driver's side. His heart dropped down into his stomach and he shivered for the first time since stepping outside.

The shadowy outline of Hannibal approached slowly, steps deliberate and measured. Even though he couldn't see the other man's eyes, Will's gaze fell inevitably from the shadowed face to the man's impeccably clad feet.

Shiny shoes stopped in front of Will at a distance that was just shy of intimate.

There was silence, during which only Winston murmured.

Then, from above, a soft sound that could have almost been a sigh.

Slowly, a hand extended itself downwards into his plane of vision. Will stared at the offering, brain feeling glassy and vacant, as though it were holding water instead of his mind.

“Show me.”

Slowly, Will reached up and clasped the hand.

Hannibal made Will sit down in the battered green armchair in the living room. He found a dark grey blanket which had been thrown over the couch, and wrapped it around Will’s now shivering shoulders. Their fingers brushed while Hannibal was securing the blanket and Will was grabbing for it, a soft fumbling of digits; other than that, Hannibal made no other move to touch him. He then walked away towards the kitchen, where Will had gestured and mumbled a few useless words.

Winston and Ponder, ever the adventurous males, followed Hannibal, circling his legs. Muriel, who had always seemed to be particularly sensitive to Will’s moods, stayed with him and curled up again around his feet. This time, her warm tongue against his cold toes made him jump.

He didn’t know how much time passed before Hannibal returned to the living room. His face was impassive, the exotic lines betraying absolutely no emotion or thought.

Something stirred within Will, a tiny droplet of heat in the middle of the icy pond that had become his insides. He barely recognized it for what it was: anger. But there it was, slick and warm, like the lick of a candle’s flame. How dare Hannibal look so unmoved, having seen what was in the kitchen. How *dare* he be so calm and composed and utterly unaffected. It wasn’t fair—it was *inhuman.*

Will stared at the buttons of Hannibal’s waistcoat, anger bubbling in his belly.

“There is quite a mess in your kitchen.”

The laugh that Will emitted was literally torn from his throat. It physically hurt, but he couldn’t help it because, *fuck* if that wasn’t the understatement of the year.

Hannibal did not think it quite as funny. There wasn’t even a twitch of muscle in his face besides those needed to move his jaw and mouth as he spoke again.

“Tell me what happened.”

He had envisioned their reunion, when it finally happened, to be awkward and fraught with tense pauses. He thought that Hannibal might be embarrassed, or that *he* might be embarrassed. (In another part of his mind, he thought about squeezing Hannibal's wrists until the joints popped and testing his teeth on the soft underside of the man's chin—but that vision was quickly boxed up and locked away.) Contrary to his imagined scenarios, the occurrence in Hannibal's office was not the subject of their meeting. That day seemed very far away from him now; it could have happened in a different lifetime, or even not at all. It was as if nothing had transpired between Hannibal and himself outside their ordinary (not-)patient-doctor interactions. He hadn't anticipated that.

Then again, he also hadn't anticipated waking up to a body in his kitchen.

"Will."

Hannibal was waiting for his answer. Will dropped his gaze back down to the shiny brown buttons of Hannibal's waistcoat.

"I don't remember."

He waited. He could feel the intensity of Hannibal's gaze on him, penetrating his skull. He ought to look up, to meet the man's eyes and convince him fully of what he had just professed; but he kept his eyes down, hands gripping the blanket around him.

After another long breath of silence, Hannibal spoke again:

"Jack does not know."

And Will wanted to laugh again, because if Jack knew then Hannibal wouldn't be here, and Will *certainly* wouldn't be here, he'd be licking his chops at Chilton through the bars of a cell in the BSHCI.

"No. Just you." *Always you. Every damn time.* There were only two constants in the world that Will Graham knew: his own madness, and Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

The latter shifted, and before Will could worm away or find something else to stare at, the older man had crouched down before him and put himself at Will's eye-level. It was the sort of thing one did for children to make them pay attention and to let them know they were being taken seriously; and Hannibal was all seriousness, with his austere three-piece suit (jesus did he put that on before coming over here or was he still wearing it when Will called?), his exotic, unreadable features, his eyes which were just now visible and glinting brown pools of sincerity and stoicism.

"Is it your intention to tell him?"

Yes. God, yes, why wasn't he screaming *yes*? He should be prostrating himself in front of Hannibal, begging him to call Crawford and tell him exactly what kind of mess was congealing in Will's kitchen. Hell, he should have called Jack in the first place—or Beverly, or Zeller, *someone* who had the power to take him into custody, someone who would look at what he had done and put him in hand-cuffs, not look at him and patiently, calmly ask him to

explain himself without a hint of horror or fear as Hannibal was doing now. Docile wasn't generally a word he would use to describe Hannibal, but he was so serene and unperturbed, and why wasn't he freaking out? Will swallowed, and briefly looked up into Hannibal's unwavering gaze.

"I don't know."

It was then that Hannibal broke eye-contact, and this was truly terrifying. Will hated eyes, hated them with a passion; they were distracting and all-consuming, but now he couldn't tell what Hannibal was thinking—truthfully, he never could, not really, but he knew that when people broke eye-contact like that, it was because they were trying not to show you something. Will squirmed, hands beginning to sweat as they clung desperately to the blanket.

Hannibal brought his hands together and looked down at where his thick, strong fingers laced together. "Why did you call me here, Will?" he asked his hands quietly.

Will swallowed. He cranked his mouth open, and made a noise, but there were no words that he could speak. He couldn't, he couldn't—

"Will." Hannibal's voice was warm and coaxing. He had never heard it take on that tone before.

"You must say it," Hannibal said gently. His deep voice with its rich accent skittered through Will's shell-shocked brain, and he was suddenly aware just how close they were. "You have to tell me what it is you need from me."

Call Jack, Will thought. *Call Jack. Call the FBI. Call the BSHCI.* Call someone to take him away and lock him up, because it had finally happened. After years upon years of careful living, careful breathing, careful thinking, he had finally lost it. If he wasn't dangerous before, he certainly was now.

What if it was me instead? What if I was the one who came to you with my hands full of blood?

Would you protect me as well, Dr. Lecter?

"Help," he croaked. "I need . . . *help*."

Hannibal was very still. He watched Will with an intensity that was almost frightening, not blinking.

Then, Hannibal's face did something then that, if not for the situation, Will might have deciphered as being a microscopic smile.

"*Gerai,"* Hannibal murmured, standing up. "Then I shall give it to you."

Hannibal instructed him to put on the worn house shoes that were placed by the front door; he then walked a shaking Will to his Bentley, and sat him down in the passenger seat. He made sure the blanket was wrapped firmly around Will before asking him to stay, and then strode back into the house.

Will watched his retreating form stalk across the frosted lawn and disappear once more into the house. What was he doing? Maybe he was getting another blanket, Will thought as a violent shiver struck down his vertebral column. He hoped so. He was freezing.

He closed his eyes for what felt like a moment; but, when he reopened them, he found himself facing a window wherein dark scenery was zipping past.

Will shifted, straightening in his seat. The faint strummings of a tiny chamber orchestra filtered gradually into his senses, and he realized that Hannibal had the radio on. It was just loud enough to be heard, but soft enough not to have been the cause of Will's arousal from slumber.

Craning his head left, Will looked at Hannibal. In the dark, his face was all smooth planes: masonic cheekbones, strong nose, ridged brow. His leather-clad hands gripped the steering wheel with just the right amount of pressure. His posture was straight, but his body was relaxed. He kept his eyes on the road.

Will closed his eyes again, slapping the image of Hannibal's profile on the inside of his eyelids and tracing over it, keeping it there. The soft music faded in and out, curling around the image and making the edges richer. A sigh slid over his tongue, out of his mouth. He felt words well up in his throat, and then stop. He wanted to speak to Hannibal. He wanted to know what he was thinking. If he was thinking of Will. If he was thinking about what Will had done.

"Abigail is missing."

Those were not the words he meant to utter, but they were the easiest. They barely garnered a reaction from Hannibal, who simply lowered his foot onto the break and coasted to a halt as they approached a stop-sign at the intersection of two country roads. "I know," came the reply. "Jack told me."

Will tugged the blanket more tightly around him. "Did he tell you why she ran?"

"He did."

Will thought about Abigail, then. Abigail with that dead, angry, hopeless look in her eyes, pale as snow as she gazed up at him from her bed. Abigail gazing into his eyes earnestly, trying to understand. Abigail smiling slowly when she saw him. Abigail in a coma, laying like death in bed, her little hand in Hannibal's as they both slept. Abigail pressed against her father in the kitchen, raw fear disfiguring her face. Abigail talking to a girl on the train, a girl with pale skin and freckles and dark brown hair. Abigail cutting into the flesh of a deer. Abigail bleeding out on the floor.

Abigail killing Nick Boyle.

Abigail smiling.

It was all the same. All her. He couldn't parse them out, couldn't see them as different things. Abigail covered in blood was still Abigail. Still young and afraid and confused and fighting for her life. Acknowledging that she had been party to these horrors did not changed Will's feelings about her; if anything, it made him feel more protective of her.

"We have to find her, Hannibal."

The car began rolling forwards again and picking up speed. "And do what, once we have?" the reply was mild, but not insensitive. "Turn her in? Give her to Jack Crawford and the FBI?" His voice softened. "What kind of fathers would that make us, Will?"

"I don't know."

There was silence as another mile of road was eaten up under the wheels of the car. "Do you want her to be punished?" Hannibal asked, with soft curiosity.

Will's stomach roiled at the thought. "*No*," he said forcefully. "I want her to have another chance. She's still young. She has killed, but she's not a killer, Hannibal. She still has a chance."

"And what about you, Will? Are you a killer, or do you still have a chance?"

Will looked away from Hannibal then, turning his head to face the window.

"I don't know."

It was nearly 3:30 in the morning when they arrived at Hannibal's Baltimore house. Hannibal pulled his car into the garage, sidling up next to another vehicle, also an SUV but an older model, painted an inconspicuous grey. Actually, everything about the car was inconspicuous, and it didn't look like it belonged here in the garage next to the pristine Bentley. If he had been more awake, Will would have found it interesting, at least enough to catalog its details and file it away as one more as yet unexplainable thing about Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal got out of the car first, and then came around the passenger side to open the door for Will. He did not help him get out, merely shut the door closed when Will had exited. Without looking at him, Hannibal walked past him and opened a door that led into the house.

Once they were both inside, Hannibal shut the door to the garage. "Follow me, please," he said, striding down a short hallway and taking a right into a room that was seconds later flooded with light. Obediently, Will did as he was told and ambled after him, feeling cold and shaky and faintly ridiculous in his night clothes, house-shoes, and blanket.

The room they entered turned out to be the kitchen, and Will found himself instantly more at home and familiar with his surroundings. Hannibal had pulled out a chair from somewhere —not one from the dining room, but a simpler, wooden chair, tall like a barstool. He set it close the island counter, and gestured for Will to sit.

Hannibal stripped out of his coat and jacket then, and rolled up his shirt-sleeves to the elbow. Wordlessly, he set about the kitchen, running hot water and retrieving several white towels. A first-aid kit was also produced.

Bringing the kit, a basin of warm water, and a white cloth slung over one shoulder, Hannibal set these items on the island counter and looked down at Will thoughtfully.

Without thinking, Will shrugged off the blanket.

What came next was both oddly intimate and strangely clinical. With equal measures care and efficacy, Hannibal cleaned each of Will's hands with a warm washcloth, wiping away the dark, dried blood that Will's perfunctory hand-washing hadn't gotten rid of. He pressed Will's hands into the basin of warm water, and used a file to gently scrape under his nails, removing flakes of blood and dirt. Will closed his eyes and relished the feeling of the warm water, of Hannibal's own strong and sure hands, Hannibal's scent as he leaned close.

There were a few scrapes on his arms and Hannibal assessed them sternly. He applied antiseptic to the ones that had drawn blood, and put a plaster on one; but other than that, Will showed no other outward damage that could be tended to.

When this entire ritual had concluded (much too soon, Will thought sleepily), Hannibal straightened and stepped back from Will. The space he created between them felt vacuous.

"I want you to have a shower," Hannibal said, turning around. He was sliding back into his jacket, and Will suddenly felt very underdressed. "A bath if you prefer, but certainly a shower. I have a guest bedroom upstairs with en-suite accommodations. Please make use of them. I will put out some clean clothes for you; leave what you are currently wearing in the bathroom hamper, along with your shoes."

"Okay," Will heard himself say.

"I will be leaving shortly. In the meantime, please make yourself at home. I would suggest that you make an attempt to sleep. If you are hungry, you may take what you like from the kitchen. Primarily, I want you to rest."

Will nodded dumbly. He almost asked where Hannibal was going . . . but the answer was obvious. Part of Will didn't want to have that verbal confirmation, anyway. He did not want to think about what that would mean. He didn't want to think at all, actually.

He did not recall a shower ever feeling so heavenly. The water pressure was fair, and the temperature was hot. It scalded him and flushed his skin on contact, making his entire body tingle. He closed his eyes and gave himself over to the sensations, letting the rest of the world fall away.

He spent a long time in the shower, longer than he'd intended. When he emerged, the pads of his fingers were jungled; but he felt clean and warm, which wasn't at all what he ought to feel. But it was good.

Will exited the bathroom wrapped in a fluffy white towel, the kind he thought only existed in five-star hotels. The guest bedroom, Will had found, was dissimilar to the rest of the house. Hannibal's sense of décor was a strange mix of austere and jubilant, dark colors with gothic pastels placed here and there, and the occasional flash of a more vibrant hue. Here, the contrasts were softer and the colors more neutral: beige and cream and grey. It was supposed to be comforting, but Will found it disappointing not to be reminded of the house's master.

True to his word, Hannibal had lain out some clean clothes for Will; they were folded neatly on the bed, a pair of flannel pajama bottoms, a white shirt, and briefs. A wool cardigan was laid beside them, almost like an afterthought.

Will was tired. He was so tired that the thought of covering himself in Hannibal's clothing did not register as anything spectacular in his brain. He simply dropped his robe and took up each item one by one. It was all just a little bit big on him; but it made him feel somewhat safe.

He needed to feel safe.

Will peeled back the covers of the bed and crawled beneath them. So soft. He pulled the comforter up to his chin, and the weight of it over his body made his drowsiness return to him immediately.

Sleepily, Will turned his head to glance at the digital clock on the nightstand, its numbers highlighted green in the otherwise pitch black room.

It is 4:26 a.m.

I am in Baltimore, Maryland.

My name is Will Graham.

And I murdered Freddie Lounds.

And with that, he closed his eyes. He drifted, and just before sleep took him, he recalled to mind what he thought had only been a dream.

Chapter End Notes

"Gerai" - Lithuanian, meaning "good" or "okay", generally used as an affirmative.

Morning

Chapter Notes

> I apologize sincerely for how long I left this story alone. This is for everyone who has reviewed, ye small but mighty. Thank you Lia, akalilLyn, and Bamani.

It felt like the best sleep he'd had in years.

This, perhaps, had little to do with the sheer number of hours he had managed to sleep. When he had slipped under the covers of Hannibal's guest bed it had been nearly four-thirty; now, the digital clock on the nightstand read 10:37 a.m. Only six hours of slumber, but the moment his eyes had snapped open he was struck with an odd sense of being immensely refreshed.

That, in and of itself, should have been horrible; but it wasn't.

He lay there in the darkness, mind shifting from the sands of sleep and thoughts crawling to him on tired legs. He breathed deeply, not resisting as memories of the previous night's events crowded him, presenting themselves eagerly. They danced before him in a wash of dark colors, muddled conversation, and a vague sense of dread. It felt surreal; if he were anyone else, he might have questioned for a moment whether or not he had dreamt the entire thing up.

But Will was not so naïve. He was here, in Baltimore, in Hannibal's house, in his guest bed, *in his clothes*. He was here because his own house, bed, and clothes were stained with bodily fluids not limited to just blood. He was here because he had done something unspeakable.

He wanted to feel sick, to *be* sick with himself; but mostly, he only felt numb.

Will closed his eyes briefly and inhaled long and slow through his nose. The room did not smell like Hannibal; this was not surprising, just disappointing, much like the room's uncharacteristic color palette.

Deciding that he could not stand to lie in the bed any longer, Will sat up. He turned on the elegant lamp on the nightstand, and let his eyes adjust to its unobtrusive glow. He then stood and padded over to the bathroom, where the glare from bright fluorescent lights made him wince. In a sort of comforting yet mechanical ritual, he used the guest toiletries and went about his morning ablutions, washing his face, brushing his teeth, dragging a few fingers through his hopeless hair, still damp from the shower he had taken. After a moment's consideration, he checked the hamper into which his bloody clothes and sorry house shoes

had been dumped earlier that morning: but the inside of the hamper was pristine and there was not a shred of fabric inside. Hannibal had been in here already.

Hannibal.

Frowning at the mirror, Will looked past his reflection as his mind wandered back to the master of the house. The sequence of events from last night that he most wanted to forget seemed to have etched themselves permanently into the fabric of his mind; everything after, however—everything involved Hannibal—had become a little blurry. Will remembered sitting on the porch with his dogs as Hannibal's car pulled up. He remembered them walking inside, being ushered into a chair and wrapped with a blanket. He barely remembered the car ride. He had vague recollections of sensation, of sitting under bright kitchen lights while strong fingers worked his own hands through warm water. He remembered his shower, so wonderful.

He remembered the parking lot.

Some slithering heat gripped Will's chest briefly and then recoiled, leaving him feeling cold. A new kind of silence settled around him, encasing him like a shell.

He had killed Freddie Lounds

And it had felt *good.*

It was this, he knew, that made him feel so renewed. It had nothing to do with the sleep. It was as if a loud car alarm had been blaring in his head for decades and now, *finally*, it was silent. It was as if he had been swimming for years through murky water, holding his breath, and he had last night broken the surface into the clear, crisp air.

Yes, killing her had felt good, and clean, and right, and everything that murder was not supposed to be. It felt like taking control, like protecting and being protected.

He wanted to feel guilty; but instead he felt triumphant.

And, looking at himself in the mirror, a little afraid.

What was he going to do? He couldn't tell Jack, couldn't face him and admit what he'd done. What would they do to him if they found out? Lock him up, that's what. Throw him to the wolves, to Chilton and the BSHCI.

And if he wasn't insane already, he would certainly become so in that place.

Dread fled down Will's spine, making the hairs on his neck stand up. He suddenly felt ill, uneasy. He needed to talk to Hannibal, who had all the patience if not all the answers. Hannibal, who had picked up the phone on the third ring. Hannibal, who Will only had to ask once. Hannibal, who he had tasted, who had been abused by him, and still knelt to help him up without a word of reproach. Hannibal, who was dangerous.

That last thought hadn't really occurred to Will until that moment. The word seemed almost incongruous with Will's general notion of the reserved and compassionate, if admittedly

eccentric, psychiatrist. It didn't really fit in with the three-piece suits, the dinner parties, or the careful metaphors and connotations he peppered his speech with.

But it *did* fit in with the man who had come to him last night, who had stood before him and, in very mild tones, told him that there was "quite a mess" in his kitchen.

Who was Hannibal, really?

And *where* was he?

Will momentarily paused his frenetic thinking, just long enough to take in the quiet around him. He leaned against the bathroom sink with both hands, straining his ears to hear; but he could detect no sounds, no signs of stirring from within the house. Was Hannibal at home?

Cautiously, Will moved out from the bathroom, across the guest bedroom and went to the door that lead out into the hallway. Feeling mildly foolish, he pressed his ear to the door and listened again for any signs of life; but all was silent.

Gripping the cold brass handle, Will opened the door to the hallway. It was dim, but not as dim as the bedroom; the hallway had a single window, slightly shuttered but letting a little morning light. There was also light illuminating the stairs, seeming to come from the first floor. Had Hannibal left the lights on? Was he down there?

Will closed the door softly behind him and began ambling slowly down the hallway, pausing when he reached the top of the stairs. There were a few closed doors past the staircase; one of them had to be the master bedroom . . . unless that was downstairs? Did he dare go to them and knock? He contemplated, worrying his bottom lip. He didn't want to run the risk of disturbing a sleeping Hannibal, but. . . .

A sudden noise from downstairs startled Will so badly that he nearly jumped out of his skin.

When his heart stopped beating painfully in his chest, he was able to refocus enough to discern the slow, all-too-familiar creaking sound of an automated garage door.

Hannibal.

Steeling himself, Will took a steadying breath and began his descent down the stairs.

As it turned out, the reason why light had been coming up from the staircase was not because there were lights turned on downstairs; rather, the first floor of Hannibal's house consisted of many more windows, several of which were open to let in the bright, mid-morning sunlight. As Will trekked towards the kitchen—towards the direction of the noise, now the sound of the garage door closing—he found himself squinting as he passed the large bay windows in Hannibal's living area.

He had just stepped into the kitchen when a door on the opposite side—a door that he had always assumed to be another pantry— opened.

With as little ceremony as Will had ever seen, Hannibal stepped through, the beep of a locking car sounding off behind him. Will came to a dead halt in the doorway, staring.

Hannibal caught sight of Will instantly, and the look on his face when he did was one of mild surprise. He did not stop in the doorway as Will had done; however, when he continued his movements into the kitchen, they were much slower, almost wary. He approached the L-shaped island counter in the middle of the kitchen and carefully set down the two large brown paper sacks he had been holding.

“Will,” he greeted neutrally into the dim of the kitchen. “Good morning.”

Will stayed where he was. “Good morning.”

Taking his focus from Will for a moment, Hannibal turned back to the garage door, pulled it shut, and then flipped a switch by the frame.

Will’s attention momentarily darted upward as a row of overhead lights jumped to life; when it was back on Hannibal, it was Will’s turn to be surprised. If Will had seen him on the street, he might not have recognized Hannibal at first. The psychiatrist was wearing, not a suit jacket, but a dark olive green sweater that looked a size too large, rolled up to the elbows; carefully pressed trousers had been replaced with a pair of faded, comfy-looking jeans cinched around his waist with a plain brown leather belt. It was the most dressed-down Will had ever seen him—including the time he had visited Hannibal so early in the morning the man was still in his pajamas and robe.

In fact—and Will took two brave steps into the room now for a closer look—with the kitchen lights illuminating him, Will could see that Hannibal’s overall comportment was slightly off. His ordinarily perfect hair was slightly askew, a few small strands slicked to his forehead to evidence his perspiration. He was evidently as alert as ever, odd dark bronze eyes assessing him with their usual intensity. However, there was no mistaking that he looked . . . haggard.

Hannibal tilted his head a millimeter, obviously aware of Will’s silent assessment. “How are you feeling?”

Will licked his dry lips, unsure of how to answer. The more Hannibal stared at him, the more something like a thin chill seeped into his skin. It wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

“I am . . . feeling a lot of things all at once.”

It was a lame response, but it seemed to be acceptable to the doctor, who nodded. “I apologize for not staying last night. Were you comfortable?”

Will thought of his sleep, sound and dreamless. “Yes. Very.”

Hannibal offered the ghost of one of his charming, crooked smiles. He then put on hand into the right pocket of his jeans, and withdrew a plastic Ziploc bag. Will watched with morbid fascination as he set the bag on the counter and unzipped it, pulling out two familiar items which were then set gently on the edge of the marble island closest to Will.

“I believe Agent Katz called you,” Hannibal said as Will took another few tentative steps forward.

Will peered down at the items Hannibal had set down before him. On the left was his watch, the old but serviceable Timex to which he'd grown accustomed; on the right, his phone. Both were impeccably clean, and smelled just slightly of ammonia.

Reaching out, Will plucked up his watch; after a moment's hesitation, he began folding it around his wrist. "She did?"

In his periphery, Will saw Hannibal place his hands in his pockets in a most unfamiliar gesture. "Your phone rang while my hands were occupied. A few minutes later, I received a call from Ms. Katz inquiring after you."

Will did his best to hide the sudden jolt of fear that flooded him, though his fingers shook when he attempted to fasten the latch of his watch. "Hh—what did you tell her?"

"The truth," said Hannibal and, before Will could work himself into another full blown panic, added calmly: "I told her that you were feeling unsafe and unstable alone, and that I invited you to make use of my spare bedroom for a night or two."

Will released a breath. This shouldn't—last night, he hadn't been this nervous—had he? Maybe while waiting for Hannibal, but not—not when he had—why should this—he shouldn't *be* this *agitated*. Not meeting Hannibal's eyes, Will reached for his phone. It felt cold and foreign in his palm. "Yeah? What did she have to say about that?"

"She expressed that she found it unorthodox and a violation of her explicit instructions to you. However, she sounded relieved." Hannibal paused, and it was almost as if he was debating his next sentence. "She . . . also updated me on the latest news of Abigail."

At those words, Will's hand clenched tightly around his phone. "They found her."

Hannibal shook his head slowly. "No. They are not sure when they might find her. However, the FBI is fairly certain that she has stolen a car: a purse was recovered from the parking lot. No wallet or keys were found, but a press ID badge belonging to Frederica Lounds was among the items left in the purse. The current theory is that Abigail came across Ms. Lounds in the parking lot when she fled the hospital, attacked her, and kidnaped both Ms. Lounds and her car."

The words and Hannibal's smooth, calming voice poured over Will like a long stream of warm bathwater over his head and shoulders. The tremor that had overtaken his hands subsided, and he felt his fluttering heart calm in his chest. Slowly, he unclenched his hand from his phone and slid it into the pocket of his borrowed pajama pants. *Abigail*. She was safe. For the moment. On the run, but that meant she was at least free for now. . . .

It was not until Will finally looked back up at Hannibal that the rest of words and their meaning registered with Will's addled brain. His brow wrinkled and his lips turned down.

"Wait— 'theory'? Aren't there cameras in the parking lot?"

Hannibal gave him a strange look then, one that was both knowing and sharp, with the barest, most insignificant hint of a smile.

“You know very well that there are none.”

Inexplicably, Will flushed. “You have to take me to Quantico,” he said, the firmness of his intent undermined by how uncomfortable Hannibal’s look had made him.

The doctor’s expression went from bemused to stony instantly. “I think not.”

Will shook his head, gritting his teeth. “I can’t let Abigail take responsibility for that—”

“You must,” Hannibal insisted, and he brought hands out of his pockets to rest his broad palms on the marble counter. “What good may you do for her if you are in prison?”

“But when they catch her—”

“*If* they catch her,” Hannibal interjected. He attempted to look seriously at Will, but the latter could not hold his gaze for long. Patiently, indulgently, Hannibal gave the smallest of sighs. Then he bent to pick up both of the large paper packages he had set upon the floor. One he placed on the marble counter, and the other he took in hand and moved towards his impressive steel fridge.

“Abigail, as you will remember, is smart, resourceful and – some would say—manipulative,” Hannibal said, opening the refrigerator door; he reached a hand in and shuffled something aside to make room for the package. “She has a head-start on the FBI. She’s knowledgeable in regards to blending in, seeming unnoticeable. The FBI believes that she is traveling with a hostage. She stands a reasonable chance of evading custody. Besides, by approximately two-thirty tomorrow afternoon, there will no longer be any evidence of you having attacked Ms. Lounds.” He punctuated the end of his speech by closing the steel door with a soft *thwump*.

Will, who had been keeping his head down, trying to let himself be reassured by Hannibal’s words, cocked his head up at that. “Two-thirty?” he asked, confused.

“That is when your dogs will return from their check-up and grooming. I anticipate the maid-service I hired will also be finished by this time.”

It took a moment for that to fully sink through Will’s brain. When it did, he could barely do more than gape at Hannibal, dumbfounded (and, honestly, more than slightly horrified). “You hired a maid service?”

Hannibal gave a single nod and walked back over to where he had previously been standing by the marble island. “Only to go over my work. My own skills in the arena of housekeeping are formidable, but I am not a . . . professional.” He stopped and looked curiously at Will. “What did you think I was doing?”

Singing like a canary. Will shook his head to dispel the thought. He licked his dry lips again. “I don’t know. You . . . aren’t what I expected.”

It sounded feeble even to him, and he couldn’t help the slight flush that rose up his neck; but when he raised his eyes again to Hannibal, the expression on the other man’s face was thoughtful, appraising and. . . .

If Will didn't know better, he would have said Hannibal looked almost *proud*.

"Nor are you," Hannibal rumbled in his deep baritone. "You are *much* more."

Will fought against the flush that was threatening to wash up his neck again, looking down at his watch and fiddling with it. He swiped his thumb over the face where before there had been a slash of dark, congealed blood; it, just like his phone, was pristinely clean. His mind churned, brain working to sort through the utter surreal-ness of his situation. This wasn't . . . it didn't feel quite right. Or—he bit the inside of his lip—not *wrong*, per se, but as if something was missing. As if he himself were out of place, a world apart from the life of Will Graham. He had murdered someone. He should be in prison, or dead, or at the very least on the lamb from the very organization that he had worked for. He should be afraid, alone, dizzy, sweaty, disoriented. . . .

But he was none of these things. He had murdered someone, and it was morning. He had murdered someone, and the cheery daylight was pouring through the windows in Hannibal's dining room behind him. He had murdered someone, and he was well-rested, wearing clean clothes, and standing in the kitchen talking to a friend*,* of all things. *A friend*. Since when had he had those?

"Is there something you would like to ask me, Will?"

Will raised his chin up again, directing his attention back to Hannibal. He, too, seemed out of place in Will's usual version of reality. Dr. Hannibal Lecter was a night creature who wore three-piece suits and talked fluently in the esotericisms of the mind; he did not stand wearily, hands in the pockets of faded jeans, hair imperfect, both wan and alert, looking far more domesticated in his oversized jumper than Will had ever thought possible. . . .

And yet there was something about him that would remain constant in any version of reality Will chose to dip into: it was in his eyes, golden in the sunlight and reddish-brown in the shadows, and his mouth, that microscopic smile that needed no teeth to be predatory.

"What did you do with the body?"

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, and Will could have almost called his expression amused.

"Perhaps later: I will tell you what I did with the body, and you will relate to me why you killed her."

Will's throat went dry and cold fear, his old friend, swam quickly into his gut. "I don't . . . ."

I don't remember, he had been about to say (he *wanted* to say). But the words died in his throat when Hannibal shook his head once and looked at him levelly.

"*Quid pro quo*, Will. I am not necessarily generous by nature."

To his own surprise, a small dry chuckle escaped Will's throat. "I'm beginning to wonder if I truly know anything about your nature," he said quietly, feeling slightly (*bizarrely*) giddy even as he tried to narrow his eyes. "Why would you do this for me?"

Hannibal tilted his head to one side, and a shock of his fey-blond hair fell across his forehead; in the overhead kitchen lights, it lent him a glow like a halo. “As I said, *quid pro quo*. But, later” he said, glancing at the digital clock on the sleek modern oven. “For now, I believe I will sleep for a few hours.”

Will blinked. *Right.* Hannibal had not slept since Will had called him a little after midnight. *He must be exhausted.* “Uh, yeah, of course,” Will managed uncomfortably. “I—”

Then, without thinking what he was doing, Will shuffled around the marble counter to the other side, stepping directly into Hannibal’s space and tilting his head to look up at him.

And stared, stunned.

Will’s movements had not been sudden, and Hannibal had had enough time to turn to face Will as he came around the side of the isle; but the manner in which he held himself had shifted. Whereas before, he seemed at relative ease and somewhat weary, now Hannibal was stiff. Even under the guise of his large sweater and jeans, Will could see that every line of his body was tense. It looked as if it was taking some considerable will-power for him not to step backward, put more space between them. And his face . . .

Hannibal’s face was clouded and searching, his eyes dark and watchful.

Will didn’t know that Hannibal was honestly capable of experiencing fear, but it was obvious that Hannibal was . . . uncomfortable. That Will was making him uncomfortable.

Why . . . ?

Will’s eyes widened as they bored into Hannibal’s and understanding hit him like a swift gust of wind. Oh.

Oh.

Deliberately, Will took a half-step back. He felt chagrinned, and he just barely refrained from grimacing. (He refused to acknowledge the part of him, small and weak and wicked, that curled in pleasure.)

He broke their gaze and let his focus drift down Hannibal’s arm to the hand that was resting on the countertop. Slowly, giving Hannibal enough time to pull away, Will raised his hand and laid it gently over the top of Hannibal’s. The muscles in the hand under his twitched once, and Will swallowed, surprised and exhilarated by his own boldness. He watched their hands and, for a moment, it was night and they were back in Hannibal’s office, Will’s hands locked around Hannibal’s wrists and Hannibal trapped by him, beneath him. . . .

“Thank you,” Will said softly, watching detachedly as his index finger slid once along the backside of Hannibal’s hand, tracing along a tendon.

Hannibal’s irises flashed a dark and strange maroon color before settling into their usual dusky golden brown. “Yes,” he breathed, just as softly.

Will swallowed hard. This close, he could smell Hannibal distinctly, and it was a symphony of smells he was unfamiliar with associating with the doctor. Ordinarily, Hannibal smelled faintly of whatever pleasantly spicy cologne he used, hiding his natural scent; but now Will smelled the aroma of dried sweat, ammonia, soap, salt, a distinct muskiness underlying it all, going straight to Will's head and short-circuiting his neurons. He wanted to kiss Hannibal. He wanted to bite him. He wanted to tear out his throat and lick the inside clean.

It was all a bit . . . not good.

Making a small, cough-like sound in his throat, Will removed his hand from Hannibal's. It went to hang awkwardly at his side. He took a step backwards, heels catching on the hems of the long pajama bottoms.

Hannibal's adam's apple bobbed once as he swallowed; he gesticulated briefly at the counter in the direction of the second large paper sack, which Will had forgotten until now. "Clothing for you," he said by way of explanation.

Will glanced at the paper sack, and only then did it really occur to him that he was wearing Hannibal's clothes, his night clothes and, god, *that* was strange.

While he was staring at the brown package, Hannibal swept past him, moving once more with his usual graceful ease. "My bedroom is on the side of the stairs from the guest room, the last door on the right," he said. "If you need me, do not hesitate to wake me. Otherwise, please make yourself at home. We can discuss more over dinner, if you still wish it. And Will:—"

Will lifted his gaze to see that Hannibal had paused in the doorway of the kitchen, one hand resting against the frame, eyes serious.

"I want to know about the others."

Before he could think about what he was doing, Will was shaking his head and licking his dry lips. "No. There—"

"Was at least one." Hannibal's voice was firm, and so unnervingly sure. And, as Will watched, a microscopic smile tugged at the right corner of Hannibal's mouth.

A smile for devils, Will thought, *devils hiding in plain sight.*

"When you are ready, I want you to tell me about it."

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